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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [AL](#) [NATO](#)
SUBJECT: ALBANIAN MILITARY ON EVE OF NATO MEMBERSHIP:
SITUATION AND CHALLENGES

REF: A) 2008 TIRANA 737 B) 2008 TIRANA 775

Classified By: Ambassador John Withers for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. In a recent media interview, CHOD BG Maksim Malaj stated that as NATO membership becomes imminent, the largest challenges for the Albanian Armed Forces (AAF) are: first, to increase operational capability and cooperation with Allies; second, to transition to an all-volunteer force by 2010; and third, to eliminate all excess munitions. According to U.S. contractors closely involved in AAF strategic planning, of these challenges, the GOA is least prepared to handle the transition to an all-volunteer force. The MOD has also struggled immensely in the execution of its budget, and this has become a major concern for NATO Allies. That said, the AAF is looking forward to the challenges of NATO membership and is developing a thorough restructuring of the military and ministry to closer match its NATO commitments (septel). Each of the above-mentioned challenges are discussed in more detail below. End Summary.

OPERATIONAL CAPABILITY

¶2. (C) The GOA has made modernization of its forces and contribution to NATO missions the cornerstone of its NATO membership bid. It has reduced the military from its communist era size of 100,000 to 12,000-15,000 and has tried to transform it from a communist-style stationary force to a more modern expeditionary one. The GOA takes its commitments to NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) seriously. Its goals, however, are sometimes overambitious. Albania did not meet its 2008 NATO force goals, and some in NATO find their current goals unrealistic. According to a self-assessment in January 2009, the Joint Force Command of Albania admitted that out of 25 military formations, only 13 were operationally functional. One of the largest problems is equipment - both the lack thereof and the age of the equipment they do have. To this end, the MoD has planned several high-profile procurements, including four patrol boats for the navy and up to 17 multipurpose helicopters for the air brigade, although both projects have seen several delays.

¶3. (U) Albania has also made efforts to develop surveillance systems compatible with NATO. For over a decade, Albania has been largely reliant on Italy for sea surveillance (reftel a). In August 2006, the GOA reached an agreement with Lockheed-Martin to install an indigenous sea-surveillance system. The system is in the final testing stage, and is scheduled to be fully operational in February 2009 (pending final testing on January 30). Albania is still working its way through the myriad complex issues involved in NATO membership, though, and may need external prodding and guidance to link the system to NATO's systems.

14. (C) As for air, Albania's only air-surveillance system is passive, relying on aircraft to transmit their own data. The Albanian Ministry of Defense is anxious to close this gap and is focused on developing a system that would cover altitudes of 10,000 meters and higher. This would leave unmonitored everything under 10,000 meters. U.S. contractors in the MoD have argued that the higher, more expensive system is less necessary as the likelihood of any aircraft besides commercial above 10,000 meters is slim, and violation of Albanian airspace is much more likely under 10,000 meters. U.S. contractors feel Albania's focus on the higher system is driven by MoD assumptions of what NATO will want and the USG may need to help guide Albanian efforts in this regard.

ALL-VOLUNTEER FORCE

15. (C) While the MoD's ambitious modernization plans are progressing, critics are less optimistic about the goal to transition to an all-volunteer force by 2010. Currently, the AAF includes 2,700 conscripts, and in 2008 it only successfully recruited 712 persons. The MoD has developed a plan to replace all mobilization centers with 11 modern recruiting centers throughout the country, but to date not one recruiting center has been established. U.S. contractors in the MoD feel this is one of the greatest weak-points in MoD reform efforts. In their opinion, recruiting shortfalls could cause serious personnel shortages for manning depots and bases (around 1,000 persons). Meanwhile, the looming end to conscription has increased draft evasion, and last week, police officers resorted to forcefully rounding up young men to serve their duty in at least two cities (Vlore and Berat).

BUDGET

16. (C) What has concerned Allies even more is Albania's inability in 2008 to execute its defense budget. At the beginning of 2008, the GOA publicly committed to a defense budget of two percent GDP (USD 216 million). While the MoD was allotted a sufficient budget to meet this target, in the end, it vastly under-spent its budget and reached only an estimated 1.67 percent, due largely to mismanagement and to procurement failures. (Note. This figure will increase slightly as final expenditures are tallied. End Note.) For example, the MoD had originally planned in 2008 to initiate procurement of a new medium-lift helicopter fleet, comprising up to 17 helicopters. (Note. U.S. company Sikorsky is competing for this tender with its Blackhawk. End Note.) However, paralysis at the general staff level and inexperience with international acquisition caused several delays, and in the end, the procurement was canceled for 2008 and the CY2008 funds (USD 5 million) were lost. In another instance, at the beginning of the year the procurement office was allotted money to buy fuel for military vehicles, but was restricted to buying fuel at a given price. When fuel prices skyrocketed over the year, the MoD was unable to use its allocated funds for fuel purchases. As a result, the money was lost and use of fuel was drastically reduced. As one consequence, during 2008, the Albanian Navy conducted virtually no patrols of its coast.

17. (C) When it became clear in late December that the MoD would not reach the two percent target, many Allies' embassies and DATTs began expressing serious concern. Critics in Albania were also concerned that parliaments who had not yet ratified Albania's membership in NATO (such as Greece) could use this as an excuse to postpone ratification. Advisors urged DefMin Oketa to push through several end-of-year procurements to increase budget execution. While he did spend USD 8.6 million on US radios and individual equipment in the last few days of the fiscal year, he otherwise chose not to make rushed decisions on procurement, but to publicly own up to the failure. He has told Post that budget execution will be a personal priority for 2009 and he will review progress at least every two weeks.

EXCESS MUNITIONS

¶18. (U) Albania's National Demilitarization Plan is detailed in reftel b.

¶19. (U) In response to a Department of State request for assistance, DoD has sent two munitions experts for a three-month TDY to advise the MoD on demilitarization efforts and to assist in acquiring EOD training for Albanian officers.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) While the AAF must still tackle these and other challenges as it adapts to NATO membership, Albania has made significant progress toward creating a modern military that is capable of contributing positively to NATO missions. Their goals are ambitious, but their follow-through will often need external guidance.

WITHERS